

T H E C L E V E L A N D M U S E U M O F A R T

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FOR RELEASE ON RECEIPT:
JAPANESE SCREENS FROM THE MUSEUM
AND CLEVELAND COLLECTIONS

Some of the finest Japanese screen paintings in the Western world will be on view at the Cleveland Museum of Art from March 23 through May 8, 1977, in the exhibition, Japanese Screens from the Museum and Cleveland Collections.

The 37 sets of screens in this exhibition--28 from the Museum and 9 from private Cleveland collections--illustrate major themes and styles of Japanese screen painting from the mid-15th through the early 19th centuries. Particularly well represented are screens of the 15th and 16th centuries. According to Museum director and chief curator of Oriental art Sherman E. Lee, the Museum's holdings from this period constitute one of the two or three largest collections of such works outside of Japan.

Screens made of layers of paper that have been painted and stretched over light wooden frames have been used both for decoration and as partitioning devices in Japanese interiors from earliest times. The simplest screen, a single panel set on a firm base, was often placed at the entrance of a room to provide privacy. A second format, the sliding screen (fusuma), was used for dividing rooms. The third format, the freestanding folding screen (byobu), usually consisting of two or six hinged panels, served as an enclosure within a room, but more importantly, as an object of decoration, much like a painting in a Western home.

Unfortunately, almost all early Japanese screens have been destroyed, either through natural disasters or during the devastating civil wars which ravaged Japan from the 12th to the 16th centuries. The earliest work in this exhibition

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is a pair of six-fold screens executed in monochrome ink during the second quarter of the 15th century by Ri Shubun, depicting a favorite motif of Japanese artists--Landscapes of the Four Seasons. This work, newly acquired by the Museum, is also one of the earliest known screen paintings in monochrome ink.

The techniques of monochrome ink painting were imported from China during the Kamakura Period (1185-1333) by Zen Buddhist priests who found the medium perfectly suited to the expression of Zen concepts. In a Zen monastery or temple, a screen in monochrome ink depicting an idealized landscape evoked a mood conducive to meditation. During the turbulent Muromachi Period (1392-1573), when Zen monasteries were the centers of culture in Japan and Zen priests served as artistic advisers to the shoguns, monochrome ink painting became the dominant mode of artistic expression.

The demands of late Muromachi Period rulers for a richer type of decoration were satisfied by works like the boldly-designed Tiger and Dragon in this exhibition--a pair of six-fold screens in monochrome ink by Sesson (ca. 1504-ca. 1589). Another highly decorative work from this period is a set of four fusuma panels in monochrome ink and color, attributed to Kano Motonobu (1476-1559), picturing Flowers and Birds in a Spring Landscape.

Civil warfare came to an end in the Momoyama Period (1573-1615), and in the new era of peace and prosperity, nobles and warriors erected vast castles whose many rooms required enormous numbers of brilliant screens for decoration. The screens commissioned for the public rooms of these castles were large in scale and pictured monumental trees, hawks and peacocks, lions and tigers, and other flora and fauna painted in dazzling colors on a ground of gold leaf--all intended to impress the beholder with the wealth and position of their owners.

A colorful golden screen from the Museum's collection, dating from the Momoyama Period, shows the arrival of Portugese ships at Nagasaki. The fascination of the Japanese with the "Southern Barbarians," as they called the Europeans, resulted in a number of such screens, of which this is a superb example.

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The peak of creativity in Japanese screen painting occurred during the Edo Period (1615-1868), when a variety of decorative styles developed to satisfy the tastes of the aristocracy and the newly-rich merchant class. The Rimpa ("precious gems") school, also known as the Sotatsu-Korin school, after the greatest exponents of the style, employed gold, silver, and brilliant colors to create elegant screens whose motifs were frequently drawn from classical Japanese literature.

The Rimpa screens in this exhibition include masterworks by Sotatsu (1576-1643?), the most creative of the Edo Period screen painters, and his followers, Kitagawa Soetsu (active mid-17th century), Fukae Roshu (1699-1757), and Watanabe Shiko (1683-1755).

Sotatsu's Crossing at Sano illustrates a medieval Japanese poem, "Not a shelter to stop the steed/In the snowy dusk at Sano Ford." This single panel screen is one of only three screens probably by Sotatsu in the West. The remarkably-preserved pair of six-fold screens by Shiko, entitled Irides, was inspired by an incident in the Tales of Ise (Ise Monogatari), a 10th-century collection of love poetry, as was a six-fold screen by Roshu representing The Ivy Lane.

The refined style of Ogata Korin (1658-1716), the best known Rimpa artist, is illustrated by a pair of six-fold screens of striking design, Chrysanthemums by a Stream. Korin's admirer, and the last great master of the Rimpa style, Sakai Hoitsu (1761-1828), is represented by two screens, one picturing Paulownias and Chrysanthemums, the other Flowers of the Four Seasons.

Another style of Edo painting--one which had great appeal to the rising middle classes--focused on scenes of people enjoying themselves at picnics and festivals. The Horse Race at the Kamo Shrine, a pair of gorgeously-colored six-fold screens newly acquired by the Museum, is a superb example of this style. It also provides a fascinating view of different levels of Japanese society in the 17th century.

Monochrome ink painting, inspired by Chinese themes, continued in favor with Edo Period artists, some of whom handled the medium with great originality, and even humor, as exhibited in another recent Museum acquisition--Soga Shohaku's caricature of The Eight Immortals of Drinking, a pair of six-fold screens which record a drunken excursion of eight T'ang Dynasty scholars. A creative use of monochrome ink is also visible in three sets of screens by artists of the 18th-century Nanga school, who emulated the works of Ming and Ch'ing Dynasty scholar-painters.

The influence of Western art is seen in the screens of Maruyama Okyo, an 18th-century artist who advocated the direct observation and objective portrayal of nature. In his beautiful pair of six-fold screens entitled Winter Day and Summer Night, Okyo uses Oriental brush techniques to create spacial depth in the Western manner.

The latest work in the exhibition, a single screen by Hokuba (1771-1844), portraying a courtesan of the Edo pleasure district, is an example of ukiyo-e, a style of painting which derived its themes from the activities of the urban everyday world.

The exhibition was organized by the Museum's Oriental Department. A catalog illustrating all the works on display, with an introduction by Dr. Lee, is available at the Museum sales desk.

Gallery talks on the exhibition are scheduled at 1:30 p.m. on Wednesday, March 23; Sunday, March 27; Wednesday, April 20; and Sunday, April 24.

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